"Foucault vs. U2: An Exploration of Music and Meaning"

Contemporary Theory Essay by Jan Nicholas Kraenzlin

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Given the postmodern problematisation of meaning (and in particular the suggestion that meaning comes from language rather than intention), is it still possible to communicate a message of hope through the medium of music?

With a symbolic walk around their satellite stage, accompanied by a representation of New York City's firemen and "Walk On", U2 and lead singer Bono bring their sold-out[1] Madison Square Garden gig to a close on the night of October 27, 2001. In the months that followed the September 11 attack on the city, Greg Garrett (2009) notes that U2 "seemed to be the hub of a worldwide community made up of shocked and battered souls seeking hope and wholeness" (p. 72). Hope has been a pervading message in the Irish band's music since its inception over thirty-five years ago, as described by *Rolling Stone* journalist Elysa Gardner (as cited in Fast (2008)), who notes U2's early music in particular as "stressing communion over segregation, compassion over blame, hope over despair" (p. 191).

Introduction

Today U2 is one of the most successful rock bands in history. Yet their success both commercially and at conveying a message of hope, compassion, and communion (among other themes) seems to be irrelevant in the light of the postmodern views of language, meaning, and authorial intent. Although the facets of postmodernism are many, this essay will take a critical look at the aforementioned views (particularly as presented by Michel Foucault[2], but also with reference to Jacques Derrida and Stanley Fish), investigating the ramifications these theories have on the relevance of music as a medium for communicating a message.

[1] 55,155 in attendance (De La Parra (1994, p. 260)).

[2] It should be noted that although Foucault would not call himself a postmodernist, his ideas have largely been affiliated with postmodern thinking, as the essay will discuss.

Postmodernism and Language

In the mid 1900s, postmodernism was ushered in through philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Fish. Julian Young (2003) notes that between Foucault and Derrida "they bear most of the responsibility for the turn, within our universities, to 'postmodernism'" (p. 173). Frank B. Farrell (1994) describes one of the key ideas of the philosophical approach in the twentieth century as "the disenchantment of language", by which he means "the stalwart refusal to let it take on … metaphysical depth" (p. 70). Paul Henderson and John Fox (2008) note of Foucault, that he "held language, almost by definition, as limited" (p. 205). In addition, Neil Nehring (1997) comments that "through their control of specialized discourses, Foucault found various institutions such as medicine, psychiatry, and the penal system control language itself … those 'subject' to power, therefore, could hardly intervene in specialist discourse so as to confer their own meanings …" (p. 9).

Meaning and the Deconstruction Thereof

Young (2003) describes Derrida's theory of deconstruction[3] (which Foucault is also affiliated with) as being a manifestation of the nihilism of postmodernity, noting, "Derrida's philosophy is devoted to the deconstruction – destruction – of the power that 'texts' have over us" (p. 196). Of the instability of meaning in music, Michael L. Klein (2005) notes of the British musicologist Nicholas Cook: "Cook contends that … because listeners naturally focus on only a few of music's potentially unlimited attributes, different listeners may arrive at wildly different meanings for the same music" (p. 160). Looking purely at the lyrics of U2's "Where the Streets Have No Name", streets in which "we're building and burning down love", it's difficult to know whether Bono is singing of his native Ireland or of a distant Ethiopian city. We see therefore that the limited nature of language as suggested by Foucault is not due to an absence of meaning, but rather a proliferation of meaning creating the impossibility of determining any one definitive interpretation (Young (2003, p. 192). Derrida (2005) echoes this sentiment by stating, "Language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness" (p. 207).

[3] Describing deconstruction philosophy as perhaps the most radical postmodern philosophy, Erickson (1983) describes it as "a rejection of any attempt to discover and to express an underlying pattern of reality" (p. 55).

Authorship and the Loss of Intentionality

Mark Robson and Peter Stockwell (2005) note that the debate about authorship has attracted significant attention of late in literary theory. They note Foucault's *What is an Author* essay as being one of the key works surrounding the debate (p. 133). In it, Foucault states that

> We are accustomed … to saying that the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations. We are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate, to proliferate indefinitely. The truth is quite the contrary … he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses. (as cited in Robson & Stockwell (p. 138))

Here Foucault is announcing the "death of the author"[4], presenting the author as a mere "ideological product" fulfilling a necessary function, and not as a "genius". Henderson and Fox (2008) likewise identify Foucault's view as being one of the author as a mere mouthpiece of society, and not the originator of meaning (p. 201). Foucault (2005[5]) did not believe in an "outpouring of meaning", or in what he called the "monarchy of the signifier" (p. 333). Through the existence of commentary he held that "the novelty lies no longer in what is said, but in its reappearance" (p. 321). In this sense the audience or the reader is elevated over the author in terms of defining the meaning of the text, an idea developed by Stanley Fish known as the 'reader-response theory'.

Questions to Ask of Postmodernism

Of the instability of language, we as users of language would contribute wonderfully to this notion if we started calling "trees" "cars", just for the fun of it. Certainly there are instances of ambiguity and dual meanings of words, as José Medina and David Wood (2005) note, "In language we find ourselves with productive capacities that do not have built-in quality control. We produce thoughts, images, and sentences that, as interesting as they might be, are vague, misleading, or just plain false" (p. 230). We

[4] Which is, incidentally, the title of an essay by the French literary theorist Roland Barthes.
[5] See footnote in bibliography regarding date.

are familiar with the ways in which sarcasm, metaphors, and deliberate untruths can undermine the stability of language. But that is not to say that we cannot sensibly navigate through language and engage in coherent or meaningful dialogue. Young (2003) attributes free-flowing conversation to background assumptions which Heidegger dubbed "horizons of disclosure", something he accuses Foucault and Derrida of not considering. Although Fish has an answer in the form of his 'interpretive communities', Millard J. Erickson (1983) notes, "The appeal to communities does not solve the seemingly inherent tendencies to subjectivism. The community is merely a larger version of the individual" (p. 111).

Of the absence of any one meaning, postmodernism does not allow for the fact that some readings of texts may be "off the wall", particularly in instances where the text has sufficient objectivity. For example, although it is debatable whether or not Bono is singing about the streets of Dublin or Addis Ababa, it can be assumed that by "the streets", Bono is not referring to the British rap band of the same name. Farrell (1994) notes that "even communal practices of interpreting can themselves be regulated by the world and by texts; some of them do a poor job of letting the text display its real articulations and possibilities" (p. 269). It then becomes a challenge to ascertain to which degree we as readers are intended to be oblivious to evidence of an objective meaning within a text, so as not to interpret it in an entirely erroneous way. Consider Young's (2003) critique of deconstruction, in which he suggests that it

> Reduces what presences itself as the complete and final truth as a mere "take" on things, a perspective in relation to which there are indefinitely many alternative perspectives. The difference between "the truth" and "a perspective" is that, whereas it is *compulsory* to adopt the former ("I know it's true but I don't believe it" makes no sense), it is *optional* whether or not one adopts the latter ("I know that's a possible interpretation but it's not mine" makes perfect sense). (p. 195)

Finally and perhaps most importantly, we see the suggested absence of any one true meaning as proposed by postmodern thinking as self-refuting in that the statement itself would have to be devoid of a final meaning (Moreland & Craig (2003), p. 150). It is in this vein that we see the absurdity of announcing the instability of language - for in the very act, postmodernists are using language. Erickson (1983) echoes this

sentiment: “If deconstruction is to be followed, then presumably deconstruction itself must be deconstructed …” (p. 55). Erickson further notes that deconstructionists insist that

> The meaning of their words is objectively what they intended by them. Thus, Derrida insisted that John Searle was misunderstanding what he was saying [in regards to deconstruction’s “logical incoherence”]. How can this be true, however, if the meaning is not something objectively expressed by the source of the words? It may, of course, be objected that this instance on logical consistency is only a value on traditional grounds, but if this is so, then why is Derrida so upset with Searle? Are they not both right as to the meaning of Derrida’s words? (p. 56)

In regards to authorship, postmodernism fails to make any distinction between the author who *intends* ambiguity and a host of interpretation, and the author who *intends* an unequivocal message (regardless how effective it may be). Additionally, the question begs to be asked how people are to be held accountable for the things they say and write. Certainly there is a place for freedom of speech, but that is not to say that individuals can haphazardly make inappropriate public comments (such as racial slurs, profanity, or sexual remarks) without expecting some form of reprimand.

Of course it would be possible for postmodernists to deny that their own assertions were true, plausible, and construed by authorial intent. In this sense the issue of self-refute would be rectified, but it would do little to motivate the presentation of the postmodernist view in public, neither would it give the person assessing its value any notion of the theory’s credibility (Moreland & Craig (2003), p. 151).

The Effectiveness of Music as a Vehicle to Communicate a Message

Arthur Schopenhauer (as cited in Donhauser & Blessing (2007)) notes that, “Music is the true universal language which is understood everywhere, so that it is ceaselessly spoken in all countries and throughout all the centuries with great zeal and earnestness (pp. 158-159)”. As a universal language, music can be seen as having an advantage over the spoken or written word, increasing its effectiveness as a medium for communication. William Echard (2005) describes this universal nature of the language of music through the theory of “indexicality”. In it, he uses the example of a

fire and smoke, noting that "smoke does not signify fire arbitrarily, nor by resemblance, but because we know that fire is usually accompanied by smoke" (p. 133). In relating this concept of the index to music, Echard states

> Such a theory is … necessary if we are to explain the intense identification that listeners can feel with music, an identification which suggests they sometimes hear the music as a particular, irreplaceable entity toward which one may feel powerful emotions and even certain ethical responsibilities. (p. 134)

The literary critic Morris Dickstein (as cited in Bayles (1994)), goes so far as to say that "1960s rock kept developing the complexity and subtlety of its resources, until it became the medium through which the elite religion of modernism … was assimilated and – horrors! – popularized" (p. 208). More recently, Scott Calef (2007) acknowledges Metallica's use of music as a vehicle to effectively transport a message that "life is meaningless" (p. 102). If modernism and Metallica can transport messages through the medium of music, then it is equally plausible to suggest that U2 can use music to convey a message of hope.

Extra-musical and Extra-lyrical Factors

Although the predominant mode of determining the meaning of a song is traditionally the lyrics, it should be noted that it is of paramount importance to also consider extra-lyrical factors in determining the meaning of music and its inclusion as language. Nehring (1997) quotes cultural critic Greil Marcus as saying "to analyze rock and roll strictly in terms of lyrics is the equivalent of raising a cultural theory based in Impressionism strictly in terms of Monet's occasions for painting (i.e., by discussing bridges, cathedrals, and ponds)" (p. 141). Nehring follows this by a comment from sociologist Simon Frith: "Song words work as speech and speech acts, bearing meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of sound that are direct signs of emotion" (p. 141). Here Frith is alluding to nonverbal devices such as sighs, hesitations, emphases, and changes of tone, all of which convey meaning. This is an advantage that both the spoken word and music have over the written word, offering a different context for the use of language. Describing the sense of hearing as "the immersive medium par excellence", Frances Dyson (2009) notes that "In listening, one is engaged in a synergy with the world and the senses, a hearing/touch that is the

essence of what we mean by gut reaction – a response that is simultaneously physiological and psychological, body and mind" (p. 4). The French literary theorist Roland Barthes (1978) echoes this sentiment in describing the singing voice as a signifier of tremendous proportions. In his essay entitled *The Grain of the Voice*, he notes that the 'grain'[6] of the voice in the dual production of language and music in which the soul - and not merely the body - is engaged gives him an "individual thrill", creating a new depth of significance (p. 181). Foucault agrees with this notion by stating, "… biological and cultural systems of articulation do not exhaust the potentials of the body. The body has features and can enter into behaviors which are not regulated or recognized by these biological and cultural functions" (as cited in Echard (2005), p. 127).

Musicologist Nadine Hubbs (2008) goes so far as to say that any division of musical experience into constituent parts "offers the reader … a discourse incongruous with the holistic musical experience" (p. 216). This experience, according to Hubbs, includes "viewing, cognizing, moving, and emoting, as well as hearing" (p. 217). Hubbs suggests instead a "criticism … that examines musical experience in an integrative and inclusive way – drawing in the various musical and 'extramusical' dimensions of meaning" (p. 217). Professor Susan Fast (2008) agrees with Hubbs, noting that Bono of U2 privileges musical sound "at the forefront of the production of meaning in popular music" (p. 175)[7]. According to Fast (and Bono), sounds signify, and therefore determine the contexts in which the sounds should be received. In this sense, Hubbs' previous comments about the need to approach analysis of music holistically are further undergirded. In her essay entitled *Music, Contexts, and Meaning in U2*, Fast offers profound insight into the music, the lyrics, and the image of U2, and in particular their *Achtung Baby* and *Zooropa* albums. Fast examines the transition from U2's pre -*Achtung Baby* era (in which both their lyrics and image was very black and white[8]) to *Zooropa* (when U2 and Bono as The Fly embraced the innovative use of technology in their unprecedented stadium gigs and processed

[6] Barthes defines the 'grain' as not merely the timbre of the voice, but "the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs" (p. 188). In this way we can see that instrumental music likewise is capable of conveying meaning through "performing limbs".
[7] Bono, in fact, takes matters a step further by suggesting that he and his fellow band mates dress in a manner that is sympathetic with the music.
[8] For example, "Sunday Bloody Sunday" and the album cover of *The Joshua Tree*.

sounds "coupled with an ironic commentary on technological overload" (p. 184))[9]. Fast likewise draws attention to the ways U2 use prosody to emphasize the message of the lyric (for example the use of dissonance between the bass and vocal melody in "Sunday Bloody Sunday" to emphasize the "dissonance of military violence" message (p. 180). Incongruity between music and lyrics permeates *Achtung Baby* and the "Zoo" era of U2, reinforcing the band's move to darker subject matter and irony (p. 191).

Context

Farrell (1994) suggests that there is a greater possibility of deriving the intended meaning from a statement the more the interpreter listens to surrounding statements, and the more they have insight into the speaker's background. Emmanuel Levinas (2005) echoes this sentiment, stating that "The structure is, indeed, intelligible or rational or signifying, whereas the terms on their own have no meaning. It is in the relation that the terms acquire brilliance that finds itself tarnished as soon as they are separated from it" (p. 262). Also, it is possible for a message to take on a new meaning in a different context. Let us examine for example the song "Walk On" by U2, which brought the evening of October 27, 2001 to a close. Looking purely at the lyrics, the message of hope is evident in the words: "And I know it aches/ how your heart it breaks/ and you can only take so much/ walk on/ walk on". Although the words were written before the events of September 11, 2001, the pain and the heart break would have been all too real for those attending the concert that evening, and the message of hope and resilience in this context would have taken on profound meaning.

Conclusions

We have seen that there is indeed instability in meaning as we use language, but we do not therefore abandon its use altogether. In the example of music, we have discovered that there are many extra-lyrical and extra-musical elements that assist us in deriving meaning from a text, in addition to its context. Although the meaning derived may vary between recipients, these extra-musical and extra-lyrical elements

[9] It is interesting to note that U2 have subsequently come full circle with black and white photography gracing the cover of *All that You Can't Leave Behind* (2000) and *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* (2004).

can greatly increase the chances of arriving upon an accurate interpretation of the text/music. We have examined the postmodern notions of the instability of language and meaning, as well as the death of the author. Apart from being self-refuting, we have found that these theories can be critically examined and seen as *a* view, and not necessarily the final word. In the light of all we have learned, we can be assured that U2's efforts (and those of our own) to make meaningful music that convey messages of hope and of a meaningful life are not in vain.

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